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TO TRANSLATE IDIOMS: POSING DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES FOR TRANSLATORS

Translation is a customhouse through which passes, if the custom officials are not alert, more smuggled goods of foreign idioms than through another linguistic frontier.

(Juli Casares, 1956)

I. INTRODUCTION

DEFINITION

Linguists have demonstrated that knowing a language is more than just knowing the meaning of its morphemes, simple words, and compound words. In addition to these, they say, „[…] there are fixed phrases consisting of more than one word, with meaning that cannot be inferred by knowing the individual words. Such phrases are called IDIOMS"(Fromkin, Rodman 1983, p. 181).

There is a general agreement among linguists as to what an idiom is even though they employ different terms to refer to it. Likewise, the definitions found in almost all sources dealing with idioms are more or less identical. Consider the following, for example, which is a relatively comprehensive definition:

A term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which are semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit.

From a semantic view point, the meaning of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the 'idiomatic' expression as a whole.

From syntactical view point, the words often do not permit the usual visibility they display in other context, e.g. „it is raining cats and dogs" does not permit it is raining a cat and a dog / dogs and cats, etc. (Crystal 1980, p.179)

Following these and other similar definitions, the terms 'idiom' and 'idiomatic expression' are used interchangeably here to refer to such commonly used expressions as phrasal verbs, idioms, figurative expressions, metaphorical phrases, sayings and proverbs.

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II. IDIOM AND DIFFERENT SEMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF IT

All languages have phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally. Even if we know all the words in a phrase and understand all the grammar of the phrase completely, the meaning may still not be apparent. Many proverbs, informal phrases, and common sayings offer this kind of problem. A phrase or sentence of this kind is said to be idiomatic. They are groups of words which form part of normal speech in a particular language, used by speakers from all walks of life. They are the pedigree of nations that is they are never out of season. It is important to realize that idioms are not only colloquial expressions, as many people believe. They appear in very formal style and in slang, in poetry, in business, in the language of Shakespeare, and the Bible.

According to V. Komissarov (1985, pp. 208–212), „Ideas expressed by idioms produce a strong impression on the reader … They appeal to his emotions, his aesthetic perception, his background." For him, an idiom's semantics are a complex entity having as many as five aspects, i.e., figurative meaning, literal meaning, emotive character, stylistic register, and national coloring.

A few examples will illustrate this:

* *Figurative meaning*. e.g. „to kick the bucket." (As to die, but it has offensive meaning based on the context.)
* *Literal meaning*. e.g. „to kick the bucket."
* *Emotive characters*;

  Positive meaning. e.g. „to kill two birds with one stone."
  Negative meaning. e.g. „to work one's ticket."
  Neutral meaning. e.g. „Rome was not build a day."
* *Pragmatic meaning*;

  Giving advice. e.g. „You should mind your p's and q's."

…
* *Stylistic registers*;

  Very formal e.g. „to join the great majority".
  Informal or colloquial e.g. „to show one's true color".
  Slang e.g. „to be a pain in the neck".
  Slang, taboo e.g. „to cock something up".
* *National coloring*;??

  Geographical Names e.g. „to set the Thames on the fire.", which states the English origin.
  Proper Names e.g. „Achilles' heel." which states the Greek origin

III. TYPES OF IDIOMS

It is important for the English to Russian translator to note that not all idioms are slang, colloquialisms or metaphors, and the term „idiom" must not be confused

with any of these. Idioms can occur at any language level from very formal downwards. The following examples help to illustrate this point:

A lot of idioms depend on *collocation* – ordinary words that are naturally placed together in normal usage. For instance the English say „on foot”, and never „upon foot”, „with foot” or „at foot”. It is easy to find the Russian equivalent „пешком”, but not all collocations are non-idiomatic collocations. However, collocations are defined as fixed, non-idiomatic constructions, the meaning of which reflecting the meaning of their components. Collocations are, therefore, different from idioms whose meanings are not the combination of the meaning of the individual words in them. Consider, for example, the following sets of word associations in English and their Russian equivalents:

Set A	Set B
Sooner or later Рано или поздно	Open secret Секрет полишинеля
Blood transfusion Переливание крови	With open arms С распростертыми объятиями
Open letter Открытое письмо	White lie Ложь во спасение

In these sets certain words are keeping company but, you will see that in set A the meaning of each item is a combination of the meanings of its components. In set B, on the contrary, the meanings of the items cannot be determined by putting the meanings of their individual words together. The items in both sets are collocations whereas those in set B are „idiomatic collocations”. They play a significant role in translation, so much so that, some linguists (e.g. New Mark, 1988 p 213) have stated that translation in a sense is a continual struggle to find appropriate collocations. That is, English collocations have proved to be problematic for translators.

PHRASAL VERBS

In theory, phrasal verbs are generally considered to be idiomatic combinations of a verb and an adverbial particle. The exact status of the latter is still being debated, scholars being divided on whether it is an adverb, prepositional adverb, postpositional prefix, special part of speech, etc. However, here we are interested only in the features of adverbial particles.

In general, the main function of phrasal verbs is conceptual categorization of reality in the speaker’s mind. They denote not only actions or states as „ordinary” verbs do, but also specify their spatial, temporal or other characteristics. This ability to describe actions or states more precisely, vividly and emotionally is determined by the adverbial components of phrasal verbs. By combining with these elements, verbs of broader meaning are subjected to a regular and systematic

multiplication of their semantic functions. Verbs can often cause particular problems with regard to idioms-that is, English phrasal verbs can be highly idiomatic, their meanings being unpredictable from the sum of their constituents' meanings (e.g. *take in* (to deceive), *lay down* (to build), *let on* (to tell a secret)). In such cases, where the context or professional experiences fail to reveal the sense of a phrasal verb, a good explanatory or bilingual dictionary can be of great help to the translator. All of these expressions demonstrate how the translation of idiomatic expression can often end in bland expressions in the target language if not undertaken by an expert.

No item of the language, let alone an idiom, has meaning in isolation. To clarify the intended meaning of the idiom, it must be put into context. This is called linguistic context and refers to other words used in the same sentence. Then there is the physical or extra linguistic context which has to do with the described situation. It is important to note that some idioms can change their meaning depending on context. So the usual translation from English into any target language might not be applicable. As an example, consider the idiom „at the top of the tree" and put it in this sentence: „John is at the top of the tree now." Is the reader sure what the sentence is saying about?

Is he in a dangerous position?

Is he hallucinating? Or he is hiding?

One just cannot say now, but put the idiom in a proper context, and the meaning becomes clear: „Ten years ago John joined the company, and now he is the general manager! Yes, he is really at the top of the tree!" The idiom means 'to be at the top of one's profession or to be successful'.

This goes to show that even if you succeed in locating a similar expression in the other language at first, it may be inappropriate given the context. This can be extremely frustrating for the translators.

IV. TO TRANSLATE IDIOMS –THE ACTUAL MEANING

In our world, which embraces more than 3000 languages, communication between different nations with different languages is feasible through translation, e.g. translation is absolutely essential. As Lörscher (1991, p. 1) puts it, the ever-increasing exchange of information in areas such as economy, politics and science, makes communication between different languages and cultures absolutely vital. As the world is becoming more internationalized each day, also language skills are emphasized more than ever.

This phenomenon has resulted in the fact that the importance of translation has also grown greater than ever before. Translation enables communication across cultural and linguistic boundaries and reinforces intercultural understanding.

In defining translation, Nida (1964, p. 95) points out: Translation is „… reproducing in the receptor language (target language) the closest natural

equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style." (Cited in Miremadi, 1993, p. 123). And all this depends on the work of the translators, whose job is to convey ideas and information from one language to another. So, the task of transmitting information across language barriers is both difficult and demanding, as the languages are living entities, which change on an almost daily basis. The translators have to avoid falling into a great many pitfalls, and a good translation requires more than the mastery of two or more languages. Quality work demands comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of a particular field. Idiomatic expressions are always language- and culture-specific. An expression in one language may not exist in some other language, or the language may have a very different expression to convey the same meaning. They are the patrimony of a culture and tradition; they present centuries of life in a determined sociolinguistic context and geographical setting and are therefore the heart and soul of a linguistic community. It is precisely this culture-bound nature that makes them unmanageable for translators who do not belong to the same linguistic community and who cannot instinctively – as native speakers do – recognize a clear semantic, pragmatic and syntactic pattern.

Idiomatic expressions, proverbs and metaphors are particularly hard to translate well. Where **an English person** *kills two birds with one stone*, **a German** will *kill two flies with one flap* (**Zwei Fliegen mit einer Klappe schlagen)**, and **a Russian** *kill two rabbits (Убить двух зайцев).* When *it is raining cats and dogs* **in England**, **in Germany** *there are strings falling from sky* **(Es gießt wie aus Kannen)** and **in Russia** *it is raining from the bucket (*Дождь льёт **как из ведра).**

The most difficult things, however, are often the unspoken facts and illustrations that arise from the cultural background of the source language. But it is totally impossible to know all the English, German, Russian or any other language fairy tales, legends or customs. It is only natural that they may pose great difficulties and challenges for translators. And the question of idioms is certainly one of them. But they cannot be literally translated into other languages. Not a few writers likewise opposed literal, word-for-word translation of idioms. For example, the French scholar, Dolet (1509–1546), suggests that, in order to produce an adequate translation, a translator should „avoid the tendency to translate word for word", since word for word translation, as Dolet (1509–1546) explains, „misinterprets the original content and spoils the beauty of its form" (cited in Miremadi, 1993 p. 74). We know this to be true, or it is very seldom that an idiom in one language, e.g. English, can be appropriately translated by an equivalent idiom into another language, e.g. Russian, but the question however remains: „How should they be translated?"

An idiomatic translation is usually considered the best kind of translation as, if done properly, it comes across as the way a native speaker would talk or write. The translation difficulties arise in case:

When there happen to be no corresponding equivalent idiom in our target language.

When the existing „ready– made" equivalent cannot to be used as it is because, for example, the idiom in source language was labeled informal in the past and now it is considered to be taboo in style, or its emotive character has changed. In English the expression „kick the bucket" (отбросить копыта) is slang and would be highly inappropriate in many contexts. In choosing an idiom it is necessary to make sure it is equivalent at every level.

V. DEALING WITH IDIOMS IN TRANSLATION PROCESS

Due to the language-specific nature of idioms, their translation can be somewhat challenging at times. Idioms must be recognized, understood and analyzed before appropriate translation methods can be considered. One must, first of all, be able to spot idioms from a text – it is absolutely crucial that a translator recognizes an idiom when s/he sees one. The ability to identify idioms is of enormous importance, since their meaning should never be understood literally. As R. Ingo (1990, p. 247) puts it, the translator must first analyze what the writer has intended to say before s/he can even think of translating the expression. M. L. Larson (1984, p. 143) agrees, as he argues that the first crucial step in the translation of idioms is to be absolutely certain of the meaning of the source language idiom. Therefore the most important issue in translating idioms is the ability to distinguish the difference between the literal meaning and the real meaning of the expression (Ingo 1990, p. 248). This is why recognizing and being able to use idioms appropriately requires excellent command of the source language.

It is, thus, only after identifying the non-literal meaning of the idiom that a translator can even think of translating the expression into the target language. In addition to being able to recognize idioms in a source text, the translator must also be able to use idioms fluently and competently in the target language (Larson 1984, p. 116). Not only does a translator need to master the source language, but s/he must also be able to express him/herself in the target language fluently and smoothly. M. L. Larson stresses the importance of the ability to use target language idioms naturally, because that ensures that the translator can produce smooth and lively target language text as well as preserve the stylistic features of the source text.

The final difficulty, then, is to find a TL expression with the same meaning. The problem lies in the fact that an idiomatic expression in one language rather often does not have an equivalent expression in another language. The translator has to think of an appropriate translation strategy for the phrase.

In general, translation theorists recognize three different translation strategies for idioms, so for the English to Russian translator there are three possible approaches to idioms:

Translate the idiom word-for-word into the target language. Literal translation is generally considered to be the least successful translation strategy. The same applies to idioms: Most scholars claim that a literal translation conveys 'foreign'

elements into the target language text, which are generally considered unacceptable (Larson 1984, p. 15). They do not generally recommend translating idioms literally, because a word-for-word translation of an idiom is said to „ruin the meaning and the beauty of the original expression" (Nida 1964, p. 16), result in „nonsense" (Larson 1984, p. 116), and is therefore „rarely successful" (Ingo 1990, p. 246). Obviously this is not something a professional translator would do, as it usually becomes completely meaningless in the target language, though you might well find it in a machine translation. So the expression „Every dog has its day" might become „У каждой собаки свой праздник бывает", which would make no sense to a Russian reader in the original context. (Будет и на нашей улице праздник).

Translating an idiom with a non– idiom, Identify the meaning and use a Russian phrase that translates the meaning, but isn't an idiom. So „kick the bucket" would be translated as умирать, „to die". In most cases this is the most feasible solution, although it usually results in a less forceful and sometimes unfaithful translation.

Find an equivalent idiom in Russian. ***Translating an idiom with an idiom***, the most recommended translation strategy for idioms is translating them with a natural target language idiom which has the same meaning as the original source language idiom. For instance according to R. Ingo (1990, p. 246), idioms should always be translated with a semantically and stylistically corresponding idiom in the target language. S. Bassnett-McGuire (1980, p. 24), on the other hand, suggests that idioms should be translated on the basis of the function of the phrase: the source language idiom should be replaced by a target language idiom that has the same meaning and function in the TL culture as the SL idiom has in the SL culture. However, it is sometimes possible to carry out this recommendation in practice, but not often. In the case of „Jack of all trade", it might be possible to use „мастер на все руки". However, it is also necessary to be aware of language level, cultural implications etc. In English the expression „Jack of all trade, master of none" as „За все берётся и ничего толком не умеет", often used in dialogue to shorten what is being said, e.g. in speech or conversation, we may hear the first part of this English proverb, „Jack of all trade …" and the second part of it, „master of none", is omitted from the whole expression which makes the idiom sound offensive. So in English the expression „jack of all trade" and would be highly inappropriate in many contexts. In choosing an idiom it is necessary to make sure it is equivalent at every level.

The benefits of the strategy of matching an idiom by an idiom are related to the stylistic balance between the source and target language texts. By translating source language idioms with corresponding target language idioms, the style and manner of expression of the source text can be also conveyed to the target language text. The translator should therefore make every effort to find a corresponding target language idiom for a source language idiom – if there is none available, the idiom should be translated with a „normal", non-idiomatic expression which conveys the same meaning.

VI. CONCLUSION

The essence of language is said to be communication, and idiomatic expression are among its instruments. The English language, we know, is rich in idiom so much so that it would be very difficult indeed to establish linguistic communication without using idioms, and the majority of speakers of either English or any language are often unaware of when they are using them. Even at the very early stages of learning English idioms prove indispensable. Imagine a situation where two persons are being introduced formally but the parties fall short of the conventional idiomatic greeting „How do you do?”. Now that the objective of using a language in real situation is communication, the approach to its translation must also be communication-based.

There are a few parallel idioms in two languages, but not many, that is, it is very seldom that an idiom in one language, e.g. English, can be appropriately translated by an equivalent idiom in another language, e.g. Russian, so the majority have to be translated by phrase that simply coveys the meaning and image. However, it is very difficult for English to Russian translator to achieve a translation with the same level of idiom as the source language. This requires a lot of skills on the part of the English to any target language translator. The problem in the translation of idioms is not really their alleged untranslatability – rather, the actual problem lies in the fact that their idiomatic quality cannot always be transmitted to the target language text. There is no doubt that an idiomatic translation if well done is the ideal type of translation, it comes across as the way a native speaker would talk or write. So translators must be wary of the translating idioms into their own language. Even if they locate an idiom they must be certain that it exactly fits the requisite context and generates the necessary connotations and associations. Often in the end, it may be best to avoid the idiom– better safe than sorry!

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Abstract

In all languages there are a great number of idioms-unique, language-fixed expressions whose meaning cannot be deducted from the individual words of the phrase. Idiomatic expressions are always language – and culture – specific. The fact that idioms are always language – and cultures – specific material makes the *translation* of idioms an important and interesting area of study. Since each language has its own ways of expressing certain things, an expression in one language may not exist in some other language, or the language may have a very different expression to convey the same meaning, or the corresponding expressions may not be found in another language. This language-fixity makes the translation of idioms sometimes rather tricky and problematic, it is important that this paper on idioms should show the translators how to deal with them in their translation.

Keywords: *translation, idiom, collocation.*

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